

# About Lucille Schwilk

## First Woman Lawyer at Dentons Davis Brown

Grow | Protect | Operate | Finance

### Born in Wayne County, Iowa, in 1905, Lucille Schwilk's story is one of resilience and determination.

Despite limited education opportunities, Lucille completed rural school through the eighth grade. At age 13, Lucille assumed the role of homemaker for her family of six, as her father did not believe further education was necessary for girls. However, in 1924, her mother made an unexpected decision, announcing to visiting relatives that Lucille would attend high school that fall. Lucille embraced the opportunity, later reflecting that it allowed her to earn a living without feeling the need to marry and continue her life as a housekeeper.

Lucille completed high school in just three years and went on to attend Parsons College in Fairfield, Iowa. Balancing work and academics, she often worked up to 50 hours a week to cover her expenses. She majored in Latin, choosing it because it required less time in the library. After graduating in 1931, Lucille explored various roles, including a stint as a traveling salesperson, a year teaching Latin, history, and public speaking to high school students, and eventually pursuing graduate studies in political science at the University of Iowa.

In 1933, Lucille earned her master's degree and returned to teaching high school. A year later, a graduate assistant position at the University of Iowa serendipitously led her to law school. Lucille attended law school during summers while teaching junior college courses during the academic year to pay her bills. By the time she graduated in 1939, she was the only woman in a class of 100 law students.

Lucille's legal career began even before she graduated, when, through her skill and tenacity, she secured a position with the Des Moines law firm Putnam, Putnam, Fillmore and Putnam. Though the firm was not welcoming to women, Lucille quickly proved her worth. She prepared appeals for the Iowa Supreme Court, and when male attorneys were too busy, she argued cases herself. Her determination paid off, and despite the initial resistance, she established her own successful law practice. Subsequently, Lucille brought her talents to our firm for about one year, where she specialized in divorce and maintenance suits for women.

Health issues eventually led Lucille to a new chapter in 1943 when she accepted a position with the U.S. Department of the Interior in Washington, D.C. For the next 21 years, she worked on land cases stemming from the Transportation Act of 1940, writing decisions that were approved by the Secretary of the Interior. One of her decisions was even cited by the U.S. Supreme Court in a case involving railroads—a career highlight that confirmed the impact of her work.

After retiring from the Department of the Interior, Lucille spent 12 years traveling the world before settling in Baltimore, where she dedicated her time to teaching English and citizenship classes at the YWCA. In 1996, she received the Distinguished Alumna Service Award from the University of Iowa and finally experienced the graduation ceremony she missed decades earlier.

In her retirement, Lucille remained as active as ever, journaling, and writing letters to editors, community leaders, and political figures. She penned poetry, shared her thoughts on societal issues like punishment and surrogacy, and offered insights on constitutional matters.

Lucille Schwilk passed away in 2005, but her legacy endures. Her writings, letters, and contributions remind us of her profound impact. As we reflect on her life, we are proud that our firm offered Lucille the opportunity to practice law on her terms. Her pioneering work in representing women in domestic relations cases demonstrates that Dentons Davis Brown has always been a place for talented attorneys dedicated to excellence.

Remember Lucille. Remember the mark she left on the world. Remember her as a trailblazer for women in law. And remember that at Dentons Davis Brown, we continue to uphold the values she championed—kindness, dedication, and the pursuit of justice.

## Key Contacts

This was researched and written in celebration of the “Beyond Business as Usual” event – celebrating 51% women shareholders at Dentons Davis Brown PC.

### Lori Chesser

[Lori.Chesser@dentons.com](mailto:Lori.Chesser@dentons.com)



### Elizabeth Coonan

[Beth.Coonan@dentons.com](mailto:Beth.Coonan@dentons.com)



### Tyler Coe

[Tyler.Coe@dentons.com](mailto:Tyler.Coe@dentons.com)



### Elizabeth Eтчells

[liz.etchells@dentons.com](mailto:liz.etchells@dentons.com)



### Deborah Tharnish

[Deb.Tharnish@dentons.com](mailto:Deb.Tharnish@dentons.com)



### Jessica Shannon

[Jessica.Shannon@dentons.com](mailto:Jessica.Shannon@dentons.com)

